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Catholic Charities lauds Obama's focus on jobs

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President Obama's State of the Union address, Jan. 27

WASHINGTON ? The head of Catholic Charities USA praised President Barack Obama for focusing on jobs, child care and education in his State of the Union address Jan. 27 but warned against letting those most in need slip through the cracks.

"We need the administration and Congress committed to ensuring that those living on the margins are not left behind as our nation recovers from this brutal recession," said Fr. Larry Snyder, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA.

The morning after Obama's Jan. 27 address to Congress and the nation, Catholic Charities USA reported that in the last quarter of 2009 member agencies around the country experienced nearly twice as many requests for assistance to meet rent or mortgage payments and utility bills.

Forty-seven diocesan Catholic Charities agencies responded to the national agency's fourth-quarter snapshot survey. Those agencies, it said, "reported the following increases in demand [over the previous quarter] for critical services:

- "Rent/mortgage assistance ? 79 percent increase.
- "Utility assistance ? 77 percent increase.
- "Food stamps ? 66 percent increase.
- "Emergency financial assistance ? 53 percent increase."

Roger Conner, Catholic Charities USA senior director of communications, told *NCR* that those increases were much higher than normal seasonal increases that occur as winter arrives, and they come on top of other increases since Catholic Charities USA began taking quarterly snapshot surveys a year ago.

On programs specifically geared to the holiday season, such as Thanksgiving meals or food baskets for Christmas, the agencies reported that service requests they handled in 2009 were 36 percent higher than in 2008.

Catholic Charities agencies around the country began to see notable increases in assistance requests back in 2008, when they served 10 percent more clients than the year before. As the recession deepened through 2009, the numbers have continued to climb.

"The snapshot survey shows new and underserved populations continuing to request help," the national agency said. "In sobering numbers, brutal temperatures couples with rising utility rates and loss of income have left individuals and families hungry, homeless and cold ? many for the first time."

The survey report said the more than half of the responding diocesan agencies reported an increase in the number of middle class people seeking assistance. It said 83 percent of the agencies reported more working poor asking for help; 70 percent reported more family requests for aid; 57 percent said they experienced an increase in requests from the homeless.

"More must be done to get the millions of unemployed Americans back to work," Snyder said. "Without jobs, individuals and families face considerable challenges as they attempt to meet even their most basic needs."

The report said that even as they face increased demands for aid, more than half the diocesan agencies surveyed said they have been forced to cut their operational expenses. One-third said they were scaling down and many said they are relying more on volunteers.

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Catholic Charities in St. Paul-Minneapolis said it has frozen pay and cut positions. In Phoenix salaries and health benefits were reduced. In Wichita, Kan., Catholic Charities has had to meet budget cuts by not filling open positions. In West Virginia, staff were laid off. In Marquette, Mich., some offices were simply closed.

Most agencies said their greatest need is financial contributions, but about one-third reported that fewer people were giving donations and one third reported that the average gift size was down.

Some agencies reported that former donors were now showing up at their doors seeking help for themselves and their families.

In a phone interview Jan. 28 from San Jose, Calif., where Catholic Charities USA was holding a regional leadership summit, Snyder said that although personal donations to agencies are down somewhat, that area remains "pretty strong."

Where agencies are facing budget crunches "most dramatically," he said, are a loss of state funding for many programs and reduced corporate giving.

"As the states have experienced a budget deficit, they basically have looked to human services first of all to cut," he said. "Corporate funding ? usually comes off their investments, so that obviously is very down."

Regarding Obama's State of the Union the night before, Snyder said, "The focus on jobs is something we would strongly endorse. As we look at the whole snapshot survey, the thing that is going to turn this around for our agencies is when people once again are hired."

"The president also said there would be more assistance for child care and for education, and both of those are things we strongly welcome and endorse," he added. "The thing that's going to be difficult for us is that he also spoke about a spending freeze, domestic spending, and that's coming precisely at a time when domestic needs are great."

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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